
Citation:

Tipi, L and Matthias, O (2019) Towards A Framework For Categorisation Of Project Stakeholders. In: British Academy of Management Annual Conference, 10 September 2019 - 12 September 2019, Aston, England.

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Towards A Framework For Categorisation Of Project Stakeholders

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Summary:

Purpose of research

The purpose of this research is to develop a framework for categorisation of project stakeholders that contains meaningful, practically relevant categories that will support project management researchers and practitioners. Project stakeholders are the main reason for complexity in projects due to the social nature of projects and further research into this area is necessary given the stubbornly high project failure rates.

Proposed Methodology

The proposed methodological framework is based on an interpretivist philosophy using a Charmaz (2006) grounded theory-building approach within a systems thinking framework.

Expected findings

This research will lead to the development of a framework that allows the categorisation of internal/external project stakeholders in relation to stakeholders to be informed and to be consulted.

Contribution to knowledge/originality

Furthering the project management body of knowledge and practice through building theoretical and practical understanding of project stakeholders through a novel categorisation framework.

Research limitations

The stakeholders' categorisation exercise may lead to oversimplification of findings since projects are multifaceted social environments.

Word count: 1843

Background and purpose of the paper

Much research illustrates current issues with projects and project management and focuses on the high rate of project failures, especially in relation to large projects (Anthopoulos et al., 2016; Brookes and Locatelli, 2015).

Over half of the IT projects investigated fail on one or more criteria (Keil et al., 2002). Other studies put this figure to over 75%, with cost overruns of 90% and schedule overruns of 120% being common (Lee and Hirshfield, 2006; Kutsch et al., 2015). Other reports show that 20% to 30% of projects cannot meet stakeholders specified criteria and result in wasted annual expenditure of approx. £75 billion in the US and £70 billion within the EU (Ojiako et al., 2008). Similarly, Smith and Keil (2003) and Saleh and Alshawi (2005) note only 26% of projects are finalised on time and budget, 28% of projects failed and 46% of projects are challenged on one or more criteria.

Project success is stakeholder dependent (Dalcher, 2012). While components of project success have been identified, some are poorly understood (Müller and Jugdev, 2012). It is impossible to determine a definitive list of project success factors as these are project-specific and established within the context of business benefit for various stakeholders (Ojiako et al., 2008). Project failure can result from poor identification of stakeholders, their expectations and interrelationships. Good stakeholder identification and management is crucial to avoid project failure (Pan, 2005).

Given the importance of stakeholders in projects, it is important to keep this area under constant review and scrutiny (Bryde, 1997; Hunt, 2008; Cervone, 2011; Hekkala and Urquhart, 2013; Earnest, 2015; Müller and Martinsuo, 2015).

Projects are social activities and the dynamic interactions between the project stakeholders are key to project success (Biedenbach and Müller, 2011; Small and Walker, 2011).

Carvalho (2013) states that stakeholder identification is difficult, whilst the relationships between them are key to project success (Müller and Martinsuo, 2015). Sabherwal (2003) noted stakeholders will fall into relational norms they feel comfortable with, from which it is reasonable to extrapolate that there is a need to formalize the understanding of stakeholders in relation to ensure clear understanding of roles in a project's social environment.

Existing project stakeholder categorisations do not seem to be able to address the high rate of project failures and a bureaucratic approach to this area could be detrimental to the success of the project (Müller and Martinsuo, 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to advance theoretical and practical project management knowledge through the development of a framework for categorisation of project stakeholders that emerges from current, practitioner provided, data. This framework will draw on systems concepts and provide a good level of detail to ensure its practical applicability.

Project management stakeholder-related issues

Project management has historically relied on hard systems approaches for planning, resource allocation, scheduling and control driven by economic and engineering models (Cavaleri and Reed, 2008). Research illustrates a dichotomy between the so-called “hard” and “soft” approaches levelled at various aspects of projects, from methods to management styles

because the research community assigns distinct and opposite traits to them (Karrbom Gustavsson and Hallin, 2014).

The nature of the project manager role is, some decades after it first emerged, still unclear (Paton and Hodgson, 2016). In many cases project managers sit on the cusp of a technical role, considered primary, and a managerial role, necessary for running the project.

While much complexity can be found in the technical aspects of a project, it is typical that the complexity found in the relationships between the stakeholders of the project exceeds any technical complexity (Cervone, 2005). Whilst communication is not seen as an actual project deliverable or objective, it is seen as an essential component of project delivery (Gillard, 2005; Tam et al., 2007; Cervone, 2011; Feeney and Sult, 2011; Carvalho, 2013; Cervone, 2014).

Most projects are complex, dynamic systems that do not conform to linear behaviour given the human-driven activities encountered within. A system is an abstract notion that can be applied to any situation, regardless of its complexity, including human organisational activities such as projects and project management (White and Fortune, 2009). A Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) approach, based on inquiry, focused on modelling and capturing human-related complexity, is advocated as being suitable for modelling organisational activity (Checkland, 1999; Crawford et al., 2003). A flexible process is advocated when dealing with projects and SSM offers a good source of theory and modelling for the development of project management. Small and Walker (2010) and (Small and Walker, 2011) posit that since project complexity emerges from social complexity an adaptive approach is necessary for accommodating the ambiguities inherent in project work.

Project management methods, while they appear to be more intrinsically “technical” in nature, are in fact dependent in their selection for application to a particular project by the human stakeholders, in particular the project manager, or by the organisation in which the project takes place. This lends weight to the idea that since most of the factors are related to the human element, there is a high degree of contextualization in projects and project management, provided by the composition of project-specific internal and external stakeholders.

The dynamic nature of stakeholder demands and expectations introduces uncertainty in terms of all of project component areas. Dealing with the complexity of the human element related to projects requires a suitable research method.

Proposed Methodology

The methodological framework proposed is based on an interpretivist philosophy using grounded theory building, as shown by Charmaz (2006), incorporating soft systems concepts introduced by Checkland (1999). This allows for the most comprehensive and clear building of theory from the data and links with existing theory.

Grounded theory originally advocated starting with no preconceived ideas, acquiring phenomenon-specific data which is then developed and provisionally verified through further systematic collection and analysis of data relative to that phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Subsequently, it has evolved to incorporate existing theory as verification and to inform the areas of exploration (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Charmaz (2006) allows for the use of results from a literature review as a starting point for the application of a grounded approach. Wu and Beaunae (2014) note its increased

popularity in qualitative research. Charmaz (2006) has noted that grounded theory has become known for its rigour, detail, usefulness, and, sometimes, for its positivistic assumptions.

The starting point for the inquiry will be the literature review, forming the basis for a semi-structured interview protocol, as interviews are the preferred data collection method for a grounded theory approach (Wu and Beaunae, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allow for adaptation exploration of unexpected paths that may occur as a result of the dialogue with the interviewees. The intention is to identify appropriate project stakeholder categories in order to generate new theory.

Data coding and analysis will be carried out using NVivo and Microsoft Excel software. NVivo will be used for the initial stages of data coding then exported to Microsoft Excel, which is more user-friendly in terms of data sets manipulation. To clarify, Microsoft Excel will not be used to aid with data coding, but rather to store and organise the themes, codes and coding notes resulting from employing NVivo.

Blending an interpretive approach and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) offers the possibility of understanding the complexities introduced by people. Instead of trying to reduce the people-associated complexities, as attempted by deterministic approaches, Checkland (1999) is attempting to provide a mechanism for analysing a problem through a process of learning driven by inquiry. The inquiry facilitates the interpretation of the “internal you” aspect of people, which allows an understanding of the phenomenon being studied to progress towards a solution and is presented in Figure 1.

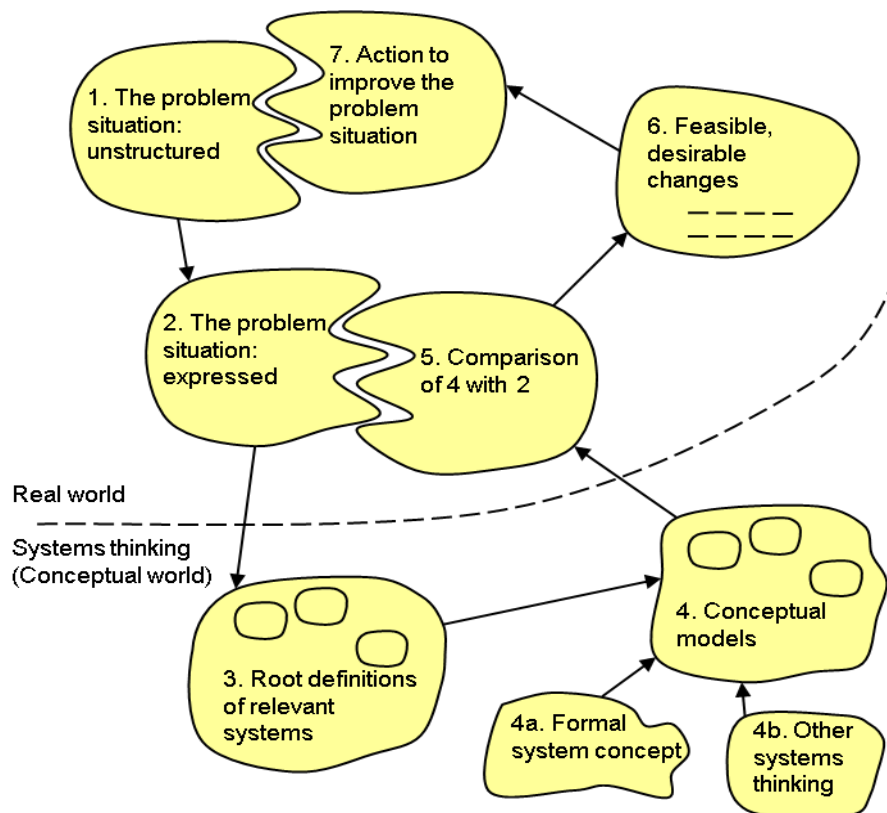


Figure 1: Checkland (1999) representation of SSM

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One of the main criticisms of SSM and systems thinking in general is that it provides low specificity (Kapsali, 2013). Because this research aims to provide a framework that contributes to practice as well as to theory, a high degree of specificity is required so that project management practitioners can use it. Combining the low specificity output typically provided by the application of SSM and the high detail provided by the application of grounded theory provides an innovative and robust underpinning for the proposed framework. Both SSM and grounded theory approaches involve iterative processes to achieve results. Table 1, based on Figure 1, illustrates the role of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in underpinning the SSM results.

SSM Stages	Practical steps to be taken in this research
1. The problem situation: unstructured	Determine research aim, question and objectives to advance the problem of project stakeholders categorisation framework.
2. The problem situation: expressed	The rich picture is built by exploration of literature and data to build understanding of project management. Literature will inform data collection. Collect data and analyse it.
3. Root definitions of relevant systems	Root definition of the system for solving the problem of project stakeholders categorisation framework is achieved.
4. Conceptual models	Identify the project stakeholders categorisation framework components. These components are determined by using grounded theory. Build the project stakeholders categorisation framework based on components and relationships resulting from data analysis.
5. Comparison of 4 with 2	Present the project management categorisation framework to project management stakeholders to refine it and assess its practical usability.
6. Feasible, desirable changes	The feasible, desirable change to the problem of project stakeholders categorisation framework is achieved through the availability of the novel project stakeholders categorisation framework.
7. Action to improve the problem situation	The research aim, question and objectives are achieved. The publication of this research provides a contribution to project management theory and practice, advancing the problem of project stakeholders categorisation framework. Future areas for research emerge.

Table 1: The application of SSM to this research

It is useful to state here that this research is proposing to use an SSM approach as a learning system to solve the theoretical “project stakeholders categorisation framework” problem and this is a valid use of the methodology (Checkland, 1999:202).

Expected findings

We expect to develop a comprehensive project stakeholder categorisation framework that accounts for a high degree of contextualization, reflecting the real-world nature of projects.

The concept of system is used to solve the problem of developing the project stakeholders categorisation framework.

At its simplest, the system for solving the problem of developing the project stakeholders categorisation framework could be represented as follows:

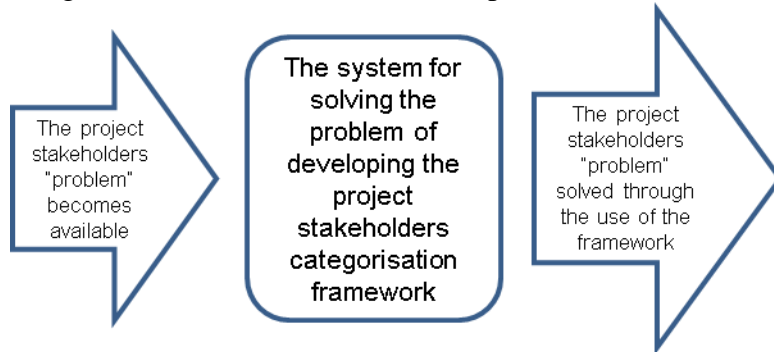


Figure 2: A project system as the basis for the project stakeholders categorisation framework

The system for solving the problem of developing the project stakeholders categorisation framework becomes the vehicle for implementing a full SSM cycle in practice. Such an approach seeks to remove some of the criticisms that systems thinking in project management is facing in relation to its applicability by practitioners, namely a level of conceptual thinking that is at times impenetrable (Sheffield et al., 2012) and the lack of detail which allows to guide the practitioner user through the inquiry process, giving the impression that in effect there is no consistent method that they can apply to their day-to-day problems (Jackson, 2001).

Contribution

The paper furthers the project management body of knowledge and practice through the development of a project stakeholders categorisation framework. Project management is treated as a human, dynamic activity, where the central idea is that stakeholders and context are key to the success of the project.

A claimed methodological contribution is based on the use of grounded theory for construction of new knowledge within a systems framework.

This work seeks to fill in a gap which, according to Shipley and Johnson (2009), exists in the availability of holistic and theoretically grounded project management related frameworks that can also be used in practice to guide project managers in their practice.

Conclusion and further research

It is expected that several categories of project stakeholders will emerge. The importance of the various categories of stakeholders emerging at step 4 as illustrated in Table 1 will be tested at step 5. The findings following step 5 are expected to provide theoretical and

practical guidance in relation to the way in which various stakeholders may be categorised and interacted with during running a project to contribute to enhanced project success rates.

A review of the dominant research methods used in project management related studies will be undertaken to ensure the validity of the claim to a methodological contribution in this work.

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